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INVITATION TO THE FEAST

It is, perhaps, natural that in a country where the only means of communication are walking or riding at a foot's pace, and where in consequence everyone in the ordinary course of their business has to walk long distances, walking for exercise is not considered to be rational behaviour. For this reason excursions which have no definite aim in view are never made. Travel is looked upon, quite naturally in view of the conditions, as a hardship which should be avoided if possible, and only undertaken for urgent reasons of business. The Min Chia peasant who has his farm to work probably never goes more than a few miles from his native village in a lifetime. He would never go up the mountain unless it was to cut wood or fodder, and his visits to the city or places further off are only to attend the fortnightly fair or the country markets. Women travel even less. A few annual pilgrimages to the big festivals at temples, or short journeys to town for market days are all they are ever likely to do, and even the women of the wealthy class rarely if ever go to distant places. Their recreations are thus even more limited than those of the men, for they do not enjoy the same opportunities of feasting in a neighbour's house, except on great occasions such as a wedding. Yet wealthy though they may be they are not idle, for if a woman has few recreations she has many occupations. The care of numerous children, housework and cooking, take up most of the day, and in her spare time she has needlework and embroidery to pass the time. Few women read, for though they are taught sufficient characters in school to write letters or keep accounts, they have no time for reading as a pleasure. The peasant women, of course, for the most part still remain illiterate.

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CHAPTER 10

ON THE ROAD

"GOOD for ten years, bad for ten thousand"—the old Chinese proverb aptly characterises the stone-paved caravan paths which are the only roads of Yunnan. To modern ideas there are no real roads in Yunnan at all, except the motor road to Burma built in the past two years. That, indeed, is the only road on which wheeled vehicles can pass. But, as the English word "road" implies, a road was once a track primarily for riding, not for vehicles. Goods passed on pack animals not in carts, and this ancient manner of travel is still the daily practice of Yunnan. Once it is recognised that travel means walking or riding at a foot's pace, and that roads are any track along which a pack pony can pick its way, then all journeys are long and slow, but no place is really inaccessible.

Consequently, the people of Yunnan, the Min Chia and their neighbours, do intercommunicate, although to the stranger the country appears to be almost impassable. It is really the indomitable Chinese trader who has opened up these difficult and precarious communications, for the indigenous population left to themselves would probably have remained isolated. The Chinese merchant and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese government, built the bridges without which the rivers, too deep to ford, and too swift to ferry, would have been impassable. They built them with the labour of the native population to serve the needs of the ruling race, as is commonly the case in all colonial development. Trade is still in the hands of the immigrant Chinese merchants, and though the personnel of the official class is drawn from all the civilised races of Yunnan its spirit and

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policy is essentially Chinese. Consequently, travellers can be divided into two classes, merchants and transport men who make their living by carrying goods, and officials and students who travel from one post to another or from one educational institution to another. As in the European Middle Ages, there is the merchant, the nobleman (here the official), the wandering student, and lastly the pilgrim, the Buddhist monk and the Taoist priest peddling charms from some sacred mountain, or carrying out a pilgrimage to some famous monastery.

The Min Chia, being one of the more advanced of the Yunnanese native peoples, and living in a region which is an important centre of communications, also engage in commerce with distant places and provide officials for the civil service. Moreover, since Ta Li and the country round about is thickly populated, many Min Chia have to seek work in other places, even as far as the jade mines in Burma. Travel thus plays a part in the lives of many Min Chia families, the rich seeking educational advantage or official position in the provincial capital, the merchant trading to Burma or Tibet, the poor man emigrating from his cramped family farm or looking for seasonal work in the Burma border country during the winter months.

There are also the regular transport men, muleteers and porters, who earn a living by constant travel over a regular stage. Not all of these are Min Chia. Muleteers are very often Yunnan Moslems, or Yunnan Chinese, porters almost invariably immigrant Ssu-Ch'uanese of the poorest class. Very few Yunnanese of any race will do porterage. The muleteers, men of a much higher social standing than the porters, are on the contrary, always natives of the province, and some Min Chia engage in this rather well-paid business. Partly for these reasons there exists a rivalry, almost a hostility

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491 points serve excellent well-cooked food. The Yunnanese
485 have no idea of comfort, yet are born cooks.

Regular transport muleteers are necessarily hard tough
492 men inured to all weathers, and independent in character. They live a life on the roads, doing a thirteen-days' stage and then back again month after month, with usually only one day's rest at the terminal points. It is sometimes customary for travellers to rest one day in seven or eight, but the regular transport caravans always make their full thirteen or fourteen days' stage without halts. Caravans number up to forty or fifty mules with one man to every three animals, the leading mules being particularly fine strong animals carrying a bell and a plumed headdress of woollen pompoms by which they can be heard and seen at a distance. These animals know every inch of the road and find their own way, the muleteers often walking well behind the caravan, for as long as the mules can hear the leader's bell they will follow without being urged. Some of the muleteers carry arms, either a pistol, an old rifle, or swords, and even in those parts of the country where "small bandits", that is to say individual footpads, still exist, such caravans are never molested, since the muleteers are both more courageous and better armed than the robbers.

492 The routine of travel followed by the caravan men is
484 curious, and to the ordinary traveller not very convenient. The men get up in the middle of the night, about two in the morning, and cook themselves a large meal of rice and vegetables, and then, when that is eaten, go to sleep again for another three hours. At six they rise, saddle the mules and start out at once without taking anything to eat. After about four hours on the road, round ten o'clock, they halt at some place where there is plenty of grass, a stream of water, and some shade trees—and in Yunnan such places are

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easy to find. The mules are then unsaddled and turned loose 492
to graze, a fire is lit and rice and vegetables cooked for the 484
midday meal. Some of the men sleep in the shade, and even after they have finished their meal they are in no hurry to depart, often spending fully two hours or more at these halting places. At last, about one o'clock, they call the mules in, each muleteer having a peculiar cry which the animals in his charge know and obey. They are saddled, and the loads lifted on, and the caravan goes on for another four hours or so until the stage point is reached about five in the evening.

The " horse inn " where they lodge is always one at the 492
far end of the town from the gate by which they enter, or at 485
the furthest extremity of the village street, to make the departure in the morning easier, as in this way two caravans bound in opposite directions do not have to cross in the narrow street when they set out almost before the sun has risen. Often the streets of a town are so narrow that two mules with their bulky packages fixed on either flank would hardly be able to pass without bumping, and the consequent confusion. As soon as the caravan enters the inn yard the leader and each mule in turn, as it comes in, is unloaded. The loads are neatly arranged in this order so that they can be placed on the right mules in the morning with the minimum delay or confusion. Each load is bound on to a a wooden frame which slips into slots on the pack saddle, and the loads can be taken off or put on independently of the saddle itself. Thus, the loads are never untied from one end of the journey to the other, and only have to be lifted on or off the pack saddles.

Once unloaded in the right order; the horses are unsaddled, each saddle being placed on the right load, and the animals are then given their feed in the stables. Not until all their wants have been attended to, do the men begin to

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482 so. The man at the back cannot see the road ahead, and the one in front therefore directs him when the road is rough or when an obstacle is encountered. These directions are given in set formulae framed in rhyming slang, and the rear porter replies in the same manner to show that he has heard and understood. These phrases cannot be literally translated without losing their character, but English equivalents would be, *e.g.*, if the road is wet ahead, the leader says " Slippery place", and the one behind replies " Mend your pace " (*hua te hen—ch'ai te wen*).

Porters and litter bearers are always Ssu Ch'uanese, and usually ragged wretches drawn from the poorest class who have taken to the roads to earn a hard living. Most of them are opium smokers, but though this probably shortens their lives, they do not seem to be any the worse for it when on the road. They spend their entire lives travelling to and fro over these mountain roads, and though unable to read and quite unfamiliar with maps, many porters know every road in south-west China, and can repeat the names of the stage points from Bhamo to Ch'ung King, more than a thousand miles. They never seem to save enough money to retire, for their wages go on opium to ease the pain in their aching shoulders after twenty miles of rough road. The muleteers, who are men of substance, owning their animals and often some land as well, despise these human beasts of burden, who are also strangers from another province.

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484 491 Neither muleteers, porters, nor travellers have any real protection against bad weather. In the winter months, when most travelling is done, rain is rare and light, but on the high ground it turns to sleet or snow, and conditions can be very bad in such weather. The mud road becomes a slippery slide on which neither man nor beast can keep a sure footing, and the broken stone paving is, if anything, worse

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going. The men wear straw sandals which grip well on dry ground or rock, and can be replaced in any village when worn out, but in wet weather they soon disintegrate, and the men finish the day barefoot splashing through the deep red mud. The wide straw hats with an oil cloth cover, which porters and muleteers wear, keep off most of the rain, but a felt blanket thrown over the shoulders is the only protection against the cold. They arrive soaked through at the inn, where they can perhaps dry their clothes and warm themselves at the cooking fire. Travellers, if in a *hua kan*, can get some protection from the hood, but this is inadequate in heavy rain, and the unprotected legs and feet are in any case soaked and frozen.

In summer, the rainy season, the roads are nearly impassable. The stone paving is usually lost to sight beneath muddy puddles of unknown depth, and the unpaved tracks on the mountain are deep in sticky mud. Streams overflow making wide stretches of water across the roads, or flow strongly down the road itself, the mountains are buried in thick mists making the way difficult to find, and the tracks, when passing above a gorge or ravine, are often carried away by a landslide. In such cases no one ever repairs the damage unless the route is the only possible one, the usual practice being to make a detour through the scrub above the washed out section. In this way the roads gradually depart further and further from the old line, until long stretches of paved path are abandoned, and slowly disappear under the brushwood.

It is indeed difficult to see why anyone ever took the trouble to make these paved paths, since they very soon fall into disrepair, and even when in good condition are most unsuitable for pack animals. The mules always avoid a stone path if they can find a strip of earth alongside, or can make a detour through the scrub. In north China, where cart and